

The following is an excerpt from a speech Congressman Nadler presented to commemorate World AIDS Day — December 1, 2001

Friday, 30 November 2001

With so many other events occupying the news these days, it's important to speak out and raise awareness that we've been fighting a war against AIDS for two decades now and our work is still unfinished.

I'm pleased to be here today with Housing Works, which does so much important work to help people living with HIV and AIDS find housing. As many of you know, I have made funding for the Housing Opportunities for Persons With AIDS, or HOPWA program, a priority of mine since I've been in Congress. I'm delighted that Congress recently passed a substantial increase to this vital program of 20 million dollars, bringing the total funding to over \$277 million.

As most of you know, in June we recognized the 20th anniversary of the discovery of AIDS. It was certainly not cause to celebrate, but it was a useful time to reflect on how far we've come and how far we still need to go in fighting this dreadful disease.

Twenty years ago the medical world was riding a wave of confidence. Our scientists had conquered polio, tuberculosis, small pox, you name it. We were ready for any new challenge. But no one was prepared on June 5th, 1981 for the crisis that was to come. Some thought this new discovery to be a rare pneumonia, others a new form of cancer specific only to gay men. It attracted minor attention at the time, but little did we know that the world was about to meet the most devastating epidemic of our time -- AIDS.

When we look back now at our response to the onset of AIDS, we see a nation that ignored an epidemic and a Congress reluctant to devote resources to finding its cure. Too many people believed that they could never contract AIDS and they failed to protect themselves from it. But no one is immune, and by the time we looked up, AIDS had reached every community across the world. One need only look at the decimation of the African continent to see the dramatic consequences of our inattention to AIDS.

In the last decade we've made great strides in this country in dealing with this terrifying crisis. Incredible breakthroughs in treatment have indefinitely prolonged the lives of people living with HIV. HOPWA has helped more than 60,000 people a year find the stable housing they need to live long and productive lives. We should be proud of these efforts.

But there is a new epidemic that has beset us. It's called complacency. The flat funding for Ryan White proposed by the President, the rising number of HIV cases reported in women, the dramatic increase in HIV across communities of color. These should serve as a wake-up call to all of us that our work is nowhere near complete. We must redouble our efforts in prevention and treatment if we hope to ever eliminate HIV/AIDS from our midst. Before we can eradicate AIDS, we must eradicate the complacency that surrounds us. We must continue to speak out and tell the world that our struggle continues.

And this is a world-wide struggle. As terrible as the crisis we face in this country is, the devastation that AIDS has wrought in other countries, particularly in the developing world, has been just tremendous. The AIDS epidemic has ravaged the nations of Africa, with over 23 million people estimated to be living with AIDS today in sub-Saharan Africa alone. Most heartbreaking is the effect this disease has had on the children of that continent. Roughly 8 million children in Africa are orphaned due to AIDS today -- a number expected to reach nearly 40 million in ten years. Now there are reports that HIV infections in Eastern Europe and Central Asia are 15 times higher than they were three years ago.

We must step up our efforts to combat AIDS throughout the world. One way to do this is through the World Bank AIDS Trust Fund. I was proud to be a cosponsor of the legislation that helped establish this trust fund which harnesses the power of the world's public and private sectors to combat AIDS globally. Money from this trust fund goes to numerous programs in the most hard hit nations. This public-private partnership is a great example of the role the United States can play as an international leader in public health. But unless we back up this commitment with adequate resources, we will squander this great opportunity. As the richest nation on earth our paltry contributions so far bring shame upon us.

We must also be vigilant against large drug companies that restrict access to life-saving medications through patent laws. The U.S. should support all efforts to provide affordable medicine to the people of developing nations suffering with AIDS. But time and again, our nation has bowed to the influence of corporations who put money over the lives of millions.

The manufacturing of affordable generic drugs is a crucial element in finally getting control of AIDS worldwide. We should be encouraging more nations to do this, rather than threatening them with lawsuits at the World Trade Organization. The battle over patent laws doesn't always grab front page headlines but it is no less an important fight in which to engage.

Here at home, we must continue the drumbeat for more funding of domestic AIDS programs. Most important of all is the Ryan White CARE Act. It is truly a landmark program and the foundation of all of the work we do to combat AIDS. It has brought hope and a bit of humanity to this terrifying crisis.

And yet, the second Bush Administration still has not gotten the message. It recommended flat funding for this vital program, which in actuality, is really a cut when taking into account inflation. Congress will most likely increase this appropriation when the final spending bill is passed, but we must continue to press for a substantial increase to Ryan White.

Finally, I want to talk about an issue I've worked on for many years that goes hand-in-hand with Housing Works - HOPWA. At any given time, one-third to one-half of all Americans living with AIDS are either homeless or in imminent danger of losing their homes. These are people who face discrimination, or have lost their jobs due to illness or, most cruelly, must choose between expensive, life-saving medications and other necessities such as shelter.

This is where HOPWA comes in. HOPWA is the only federal housing program that specifically provides cities and states with resources to address the housing crisis facing people living with AIDS. HOPWA delivers rental assistance, help with utility payments, and information on low-income housing opportunities. This program is a crucial element in the effective treatment of HIV and AIDS. There is a clear link between stable housing and the ability of individuals living with HIV to live long and healthy lives. Some people have responded so well to new therapies that they have been able to go back to work after years on disability. However, these treatments require a stable living environment to be effective.

HOPWA has been tremendously successful, serving over 61,000 people this year alone. But as the success of HOPWA grows, so too does the need for funding. As a result of recent advances in care and treatment, the people currently being housed are living longer and the waiting lists for these programs are growing even longer. That's why I've made funding for HOPWA a key priority of mine every year. Housing Works, in particular, has been extremely helpful in building a coalition of support of HOPWA. So much so, that now the Republicans are afraid to take us on in this fight.

To show you how successful we've been, in 1998, the House Appropriations bill covering HOPWA contained a \$10 million cut. I offered an amendment just to restore this cut. This was a tiny amount, but in this Republican Congress, it was the best we could hope for. We managed to pass it on a razor-thin vote: 212 to 207. The next year, HOPWA was

due to receive flat funding, I offered an amendment to increase funding by \$18 million and that passed by a voice vote. The Republicans were afraid to put people on record against HOPWA again. This year, we actually increased HOPWA by \$20 million because they knew we had the support to beat them. It's a gratifying sign that all of your work has really paid off.

We have a lot to be proud of in our response to the AIDS epidemic, but let's take this opportunity to re-energize our AIDS policy and conquer this terrible disease once and for all. This fight will take place on multiple fronts - in the halls of Congress, in the courts, in science laboratories, and right here on the streets. We need to raise our voices and redouble our efforts. People need to understand that AIDS is not over and that we will not give up the fight until it is.

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